

## AN ABANDONED HOUSE

Gu ru 'phrin las ཀུ་རུ་ཤྭ་ལྷན་ལམ་\*

Pad lo, a businessman and a member of the Tent Tribe, hired construction workers from outside the local area to build an adobe house with a living room, a small storeroom, and a shrine room for his family.

Pad lo's only child - his eighteen-year-old daughter, Pad mtsho - slept in the storage room where the family's sheepskin robes were packed in bags and piled along one side of the room. Pots, pans, and other kitchen items were placed on the other side of the room. Pad mtso's bed was near the door.

Pad lo himself slept in the shrine room where Buddhist images were arranged on a wooden table. Butter lamps were aligned in a row in front of the images while leather bags of rice, flour, and barley were against one room wall. Locked wooden boxes on the other side contained Pad mtsho's and Pad ma's jewelry and some cash. Pad lo's bed was near the door.

Pad lo's sixty-three-year-old mother, Pad ma, slept on a wooden bed in the living room where the family cooked and ate.

While most neighboring tribes lived in adobe houses, all fifty households of the Tent Tribe lived in tents, except for Pad lo's family. Other tribal members admired Pad lo's new house and longed to live in such a place. After Pad lo's family moved in, the number of young men pursuing Pad mtsho doubled, making other local young women even more jealous considering Pad mtsho's exceptional beauty.

Five years later, Pad mtsho would abandon her family's house to live alone in a tent.

Pad lo often traveled to other tribes, buying and selling yaks, returning home only two or three times a year for short stays. When his mother had a high fever and almost died, it was one of Pad ma's relatives who took her to a clinic. Locals, especially those who had never ventured beyond the tribe's territory, criticized Pad ma for being a dishonest husband, unfilial son, and irresponsible father.

Once, when Pad lo had been absent for weeks, his wife could no longer bear the local criticisms she heard of her husband, so she left, leaving her daughter with her mother-in-law.

One winter morning, two years earlier, Pad ma had slipped and fallen on the frozen ground, twisting and permanently injuring her right knee. Afterward, she had used a walking stick to move about. Each time pain gripped her knee, she chastised herself, reasoning that the pain was retribution for leaving her first husband, a decision she now intensely regretted. He had tolerated her bad temper and had been kind to her. Though her second husband was handsome, he aimlessly wandered here and there with his fellows, ignoring his family members. Unable to accept her second husband's irresponsible attitude, she again divorced.

Each time neighbor women chatted with Pad ma about her daughter-in-law's departure, Pad ma would say, "Her departure is understandable and reasonable."

Pad mtsho herded the family's yaks and did most of the family chores.

Pad ma hoped her son would remarry, although she was not very sure about this. She thought he might divorce the woman he married, as she had divorced her first and second husbands. She was also concerned about her granddaughter Pad mtsho being unmarried.

Several young men knocked on Pad mtsho's window one night and attempted to open the house's main entrance door. Furious, Pad mtsho rushed out of the house with her slingshot and quickly, picking up some stones, shot at her retreating suitors. From that night on, there were few night visitors.

\*Gu ru 'phrin las. 2021. An Abandoned House. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 60:406-409.

One morning, Pad ma advised Pad mtsho, "Be gentle. No one will marry a violent woman."

Pad mtsho replied, "I don't care. I prefer being single to marrying an irresponsible man."

"You know my knee gets worse and worse. I can't help much with family chores, and your father is often not at home, so you should marry," Pad ma continued.

Pad mtsho inquired, "Who should I marry?"

"A good man."

"How do I know he's a good man?"

"He's kind to you."

"I don't want to marry a good man if I don't love him."

"A smart woman marries a good man or a man who loves her. You can have a handsome boyfriend who doesn't love you. Don't marry a man you love but who doesn't love you."

"Do you think you are a smart woman?"

Pad ma had nothing to say.

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Two years later, one of Pad mtsho's friends married and had a son a year later. One day, Pad mtsho met her now-married friend while they were herding yaks high on a mountain. They chatted about marriage and gossiped about unmarried women who were in their late twenties and even thirties. They talked till it was time to drive the yaks back home.

Time passed, and Pad mtsho told her grandmother she had decided to marry her current boyfriend. Her grandmother was curious, "Are you sure? Is he a good man?"

"I'm sure. We started the relationship six months ago. He's kind to me and has never been angry with me."

"You know a couple recently divorced after a decade of marriage and three children. The husband had an affair for three years. Be careful. Don't marry the wrong man."

"I'm not like you."

Pad ma ignored this, knowing a serious squabble would ensue if she responded.

After a long absence, Pad lo returned home at the wheel of a white four-door car. Locals came to have a look at the car. Some flattered, "When you drive this car, you are so handsome!"

Pad lo was called "Frog-eyes" by locals because of his big, bulging eyes. He was short, fat, and limped due to a bullet lodged in his right leg during a conflict with a neighboring tribe some years earlier. After the visitors finished inspecting the car, they all entered the house, except for one man who planned to have a house built for his family the following year. He circled Pad lo's house, carefully inspecting its construction details, and then he noticed something wrapped in black cloth lying near the outside of the house. He picked it up and was shocked to discover a dead premmie baby with a bit of hair on its head, wrapped in blood-stained cloth.

News quickly spread through the tribe of a dead infant discarded at the back of Pad lo's family's house.

Pad mtsho and her boyfriend had agreed to discuss a date for their wedding the next day. Pad mtsho got up early, washed her face, gazed into the mirror, and removed a hair from her right cheek. Looking at her round double-lidded eyes, high straight nose, and long face, she was proud of her beauty. She put on a new red shirt and fabric robe and consulted the mirror again.

A few minutes later, she mounted a black yak with a single white spot on its head, smiled, and drove the family's yaks into a valley.

She waited for her boyfriend the whole day.

He never came.

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Pad ma learned the identity of the dead infant's mother and asked Pad mtsho, "Shall we tell others the truth about the mother of the dead infant?"

"There's no reason to hurt another young woman."

"If you don't tell the truth, no one will marry you. We should tell others you are not the dead infant's mother," explained Pad ma

"I already lost my lover. Who am I supposed to marry? I don't want the engaged young woman to lose her lover. She loves him."

Pad ma stared at her granddaughter and regretted having questioned her decision to marry her boyfriend. I've destroyed her life and marriage. Now it's too late, she thought.

Pad ma was sure she couldn't persuade Pad mtsho and prayed for the day when locals would discover the truth.

A month passed.

One night, Pad lo scolded his daughter, "How shameful!"

When Pad mtsho saw her father's angry face, she dared not argue and kept her head down.

Noticing tears streaming down her granddaughter's cheeks, Pad ma felt compelled to intervene and declared, "She's innocent. Trust your mother and your daughter instead of others who will say whatever they like to say! They distort the truth and hurt others. You will only torture yourself if you trust others' every word."

Pad lo's only response was to stop eating supper, get up, and limp to his bedroom. Pad ma and her granddaughter also lost interest in eating and left half of their rice noodles with beef in their metal bowls and went to bed. Pad ma sat on her bed for a while, thinking before going to sleep.

The next day was rainy and chilly. As Pad mtsho was milking the family's yaks, she noticed her father was climbing a wooden ladder that construction workers had left. She imagined the roof was leaking again. Suddenly, she saw her father slip off the ladder and hit the ground with a loud plop. As she shouted for her grandmother, her wooden bucket turned over on the muddy ground. Milk splashed, leaving a ragged white circle on the ground.

The two women were terrified when white foam bubbled from Pad lo's mouth. Distressed and at a loss, they watched Pad lo for a few minutes until he opened his eyes. Unable to speak, Pad ma grabbed her son's left arm while Pad mtsho held her father's right arm. Together they pulled Pad lo into the house, his legs dragging, leaving a trail behind them. After they got him into his bed, Pad ma put a Buddha image near his head and patted his head with a volume of scripture.

Several hours later, Pad lo could speak a little. He reassured them he was fine and there was no need to go to the local clinic.

A few days later, Pad lo unexpectedly passed away.

After her son's death, Pad ma occasionally refused to eat supper. When Pad mtsho asked why, Pad ma explained that she was not hungry. As more days passed, Pad ma's eyes became sunken, her cheekbones were prominent, and the wrinkles on her forehead deepened. Though Pad mtsho urged her grandmother to eat, she ate very little.

Winter came.

One snowy morning, Pad mtsho got up early as usual and drove the family's yaks to a mountain. When Pad ma put on her robe and went out to pee, she tripped on the doorsill, fell, and her head hit a stone. She was unconscious as blood trickled from her head wound, turning the stone bright red.

When Pad mtsho returned home for breakfast, she saw her grandmother sprawled on the ground. Tall and robust, Pad mtsho carried Pad ma into the house and put her in bed. As she used her sleeve to wipe dried blood from the left side of her head, she gazed at her grandmother's pale face and hugged her. Pad ma grunted in pain and said her left ribs were very painful.

The next day, one of Pad ma's cousins, a gambler, visited and suggested Pad ma stay at home because the road to the clinic was terrible, and she would be in agony all the way given her bruised ribs. Adding that even broken ribs were not necessarily a severe issue, he announced that he would drive Pad lo's car to the clinic and bring a doctor back.

Pad ma and her granddaughter waited. It got dark.

Nobody came.

The following day, Pad ma's health had further deteriorated. Her lips were dry, and her face was pale. She lay on one side in her bed for the whole day, covered by her sheepskin robe. Her granddaughter cooked beef soup in the morning. When she offered Pad ma a bowl, Pad ma's hands shook, so Pad mtsho held the bowl. After a few sips, Pad ma lay back down and put her head on a pillow of folded sheepskin that Pad mtsho had worn when she was five years old. Sweat appeared on her wrinkled forehead, and she could not speak.

Three days passed. No doctors came, nor did the cousin return. The grandmother's situation worsened, and then she died.

Pad mtsho now lived alone in the house. Locals continued to gossip about her. A woman sympathized and regretted that she had destroyed Pad mtsho's reputation to save herself, but she dared not acknowledge the truth.

Pad mtsho explained to a night visitor that she didn't want locals to hurt another woman, so she had not told the truth to the man who was the dead infant's father. The man listened sympathetically and suggested that her father and grandmother's deaths were related to the house.

Some months later, Pad mtsho lived alone in a small tent pitched next to her gambler cousin's family tent. The Tent Tribe's tents were scattered at the bottom of a high mountain. The house was located at the border of the Tent Tribe's territory, far from the tents. The house's windows and door lock were broken. The wind banged the squeaking door as it swung back and forth on rusty, unoiled hinges.

#### TIBETAN TERMS

gu ru 'phrin las ཀུ་རུ་འཕྲིན་ལས།

pad lo པད་ལོ།

pad ma པད་མ།

pad mtsho པད་མཚོ།